

DOUBTING "DESCARTES'S SELF-DOUBT"

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ABSTRACT

In the second Meditation Descartes claims to establish beyond a doubt that he exists. In the third Meditation, however, he seems to question this claim. There he maintains that until he has proven that there is a non-deceiving God, he cannot remove the demon hypothesis and, hence, cannot "be certain of anything." In his "Descartes Self-Doubt" Donald Sievert proposes a reading of the text which would allow Descartes to make both claims without contradiction. According to Sievert, Descartes advances two distinct claims for self-knowledge--that is, Descartes claims self-knowledge of an occurrent self and self-knowledge of a substantial self. While the latter is subject to doubt until the demon is dismissed, the former is never doubted. I find Sievert's interpretation enticing but incorrect. The distinction which he sees clearly in the Meditations is one which, I believe, Descartes was working toward, but one which he did not have clearly in mind.

Doubting "Descartes's Self-Doubt"

In the second Meditation Descartes claims to establish beyond a doubt that he exists. In the third Meditation, however, he seems to question this claim. There he maintains that until he has proven that there is a non-deceiving God, he can not remove the demon hypothesis and, hence, can not "...be certain of anything" (HR I, 159).¹ In his "Descartes's Self-Doubt"² Donald Sievert proposes a reading of the text which would allow Descartes to make both claims without contradiction. According to Sievert, Descartes advances two distinct claims for self-knowledge. First Descartes argues for an "occurrent" conception of the self. That is, Descartes "observes" certain mental acts and "...not even the demon can deceive him about knowing that an act he is 'observing' exists" (S, 59). Secondly, Descartes claims self-knowledge of a substantial self--an agent underlying these occurrent mental acts. Self-knowledge of the substantial self is inferred rather than observed, and this inference is subject to doubt--until the demon hypothesis has been disposed of.

James Humber, in his "Doubts about 'Descartes's Self-Doubt,'"³ argues that Sievert's interpretation is inadequate. While I would also assert that there are difficulties with Sievert's reading of the Meditations, I do not find Humber's criticisms successful. Thus, I will defend Sievert's interpretation against Humber's arguments, and then indicate where I feel Sievert's interpretation runs into difficulties. The consideration of Humber's arguments provides a clarification of Sievert's views, which, finally,

¹All references to Descartes are to The Philosophical Works of Descartes, E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (trans.), Cambridge, 1969 Volumes I and II. These citations are indicated by "HR" in the text and followed by the volume and page number.

²Donald Sievert, "Descartes's Self-Doubt," The Philosophical Review, Vol. 84 (1975), pp. 51-70. Hereafter cited as "S" and followed by the page number.

³James Humber, "Doubts about 'Descartes's Self-Doubt,'" The Philosophical Review, Vol. 87 (1978), pp. 253-258. Hereafter cited as "H" and followed by the page number.

shows both the strength and the inadequacy of the interpretation. I shall argue that Sievert says what Descartes should have said, but that Descartes was not as clear as Sievert's Descartes.

I.

Briefly, Sievert maintains that Descartes' final argument for self-knowledge in the sixth Meditation (HR I, 190) has the following form:

- (1) I 'observe' occurrent mental acts.
- (2) I cannot conceive of them existing apart from a thinking substance.
- (3) If God is no deceiver, I may conclude that my inability to conceive of occurrent acts existing apart from a thinking substance accords with the fact that they cannot exist apart from such a substance.
- (4) Therefore, providing God is no deceiver, whenever I 'observe' a mental act I may 'rightly conclude' that there is a thinking substance 'in' which those acts are or to which they are 'attached'--that is, that I am thinking thing or substance (S, 55).

This argument is clearly fallacious. The most one could validly conclude from the premisses would be that a thinking substance exists. The final assertion of (4)--that I am a thinking thing or substance--is not warranted. Thus a modified conclusion, (4'), suggests itself--one which consists of (4) above devoid of its final clause and asserts merely that there is a thinking substance. At several points in his paper Sievert paraphrases the argument using the modified conclusion, (4')⁴. Clearly the difference between (4) and (4') is all the difference in the world given Descartes' enterprise, but (4') can be nonfallaciously drawn from (1), (2), and (3).

The first premiss of the argument is also subject to two interpretations. As is (1) suggests merely that there are occurrent acts of thought which are observed--no claim is

⁴Cf., p. 51, pp. 54-55, and pp. 62-63 of Sievert's article. In a footnote on pp. 59-60 he discusses the views of Lichtenberg, Wittgenstein, Schlick, and Strawson who all maintain that (4') rather than (4) is the proper conclusion here.

offered as to whose acts these are. Sievert also maintains, however, that in offering (1) Descartes claims self-knowledge--thus, "...not even the demon can deceive him about knowing that an act he is 'observing' exists. He can be certain that (his) mental₅ acts exist when and because he 'observes' them" (S, 59).⁵ This suggests that (1) should be reformulated as:

(1') I observe my occurrent mental acts.

A modified argument which replaced (1) with (1') and accepts (2) and (3) would not be fallacious in drawing (4) as its conclusion--though, of course, its soundness would depend upon the truth of the premisses. It is clear, I take it, that Descartes would offer, ultimately, the stronger conclusion (that I am a thinking thing) rather than the weaker conclusion (4'). It is not clear whether Sievert takes him to be arguing for this view via the chain (1), (2), and (3) or via (1'), (2), and (3) (he does not ascribe the argument (1), (2), (3), and (4') to Descartes). I do not believe that Descartes clearly establishes (1')'s claim to truth⁶ and I suspect (though I will not argue this here) he wavers between (1) and (1'). It should be noted here, of course, that in attempting to reconstruct

⁵CF, p. 57, p. 59, and p. 67 of Sievert's article for other points where this appears to be the premiss he attributes to Descartes. On p. 55 in a footnote he suggests that Descartes might use 'observe' as others now use 'introspect'. In the Meditations there are several passages which suggest that Descartes does hold to (1'): "I further find in myself faculties" (HR I, 190); he discovers the idea of himself "which represents me to myself" (HR I, 164), and "...all the reasons which contribute to the knowledge of wax...are yet better proofs of the nature of my mind" (HR I, 157). The discussion of self-identity (HR I, 153) might be included here though, as I shall argue below, I believe it is the substantial rather than the occurrent conception which is relevant at this point however.

⁶R. Chisholm, in his "On the Observability of the Self," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, V. 30 (1969), pp. 7-21, attempts to argue the truth of (1')--showing the observability of the self against Hume's claim that no such observation may be made. Sievert criticizes this attempt in his "Chisholm on Substance," in Language and Human Nature, P. Kurtz (ed.), Warren H. Green, St. Louis, MO, 1971.

Descartes' argument Sievert need not claim that it is valid. As he offers the argument as cited above--e.g., (1), (2), (3), and (4)--and he shows an awareness of both (1') and (4') and the various possible arguments, we can only conclude that he sees Descartes as arguing fallaciously.

According to Sievert this argument is premissed upon three things: an observation of certain occurrent mental acts, a clear conception of the relation between acts and agents (thinking substances), and the existence of a non-deceiving deity who guarantees clear conceptions such as the one between agents and acts. The soundness of the inference, then, may be questioned as long as the third premiss is in question. Of course, it is this question which is to be settled in the third Meditation. In that Meditation Descartes maintains that when we consider ideas "...only in themselves and do not relate them to anything else beyond themselves, they cannot properly speaking be false..." (HR I, 159). Since the perception of the occurrent mental acts treats ideas only "in themselves," only as occurrent, such perception, and the self-knowledge which it provides, is not subject to doubt. It is only when ideas are considered as representations that the danger of falsity arises and doubt becomes appropriate.

This discussion of occurrent acts and ideas may appear to embody a confusion between idea-ideate and mode-substance discourse. There is no such confusion here however. In his Preface to the Meditations Descartes says that he uses 'idea' equivocally: "... it may either be taken materially,

⁷After discussing the views of Lichtenberg, Wittgenstein, Schlick, and Strawson in regard to (4) and (4') Sievert says "Descartes...is sure only that there is a thought-- i.e., an act of thinking--at one stage of his argument. In effect, he allows that prior to the knowledge of God he can know, when he thinks, that 'there is thought' is true and not that 'I, a thinking substance (an Ego) exists' is true" (S, 60 note). Here it seems it is (1) Sievert attributes to Descartes. Yet if Descartes is to be able to be both doubtful and certain (at the same time) of his claim to self-knowledge, the conception he would need is (1') not merely (1). As I indicated above, I would ascribe the ambiguity here to Descartes--though I think that Sievert's interpretation would be greatly strengthened if he dealt directly with this problem.

as an act of my understanding...or objectively, as what is represented by this act" (HR I, 138). In discussing ideas "in themselves" here he is clearly speaking "materially"--no question of representational relationship is to be relevant. It is because of this that such ideas can not be false: "...if I considered the ideas only as certain modes of thoughts, without trying to relate them to anything beyond, they could scarcely give me material for error" (HR I, 160). While he does maintain that "of my thoughts some are, so to speak, images of things, and to these alone is the title 'idea' properly applied" (HR I, 159), he speaks (both before and after this passage) of ideas as acts. Thus willing, fearing, approving and denying are deemed "actions of mind" ("action de mon esprit") (HR I, 159) and, when suitably limited, they (or the act of imagining) may be used as examples of ideas considered "in themselves" (HR I, 159-160). As he calls these "ideas" and "modes of thought" we are presented with non representational mental acts which are observed--occurrent acts which are ideas and modes.

Similarly one page before the last remark, after relating the many things he clearly and distinctly perceived as true, then hypothesizing that such clarity and distinctness might be a general mark of truth, and finally admitting he had previously found occasion to doubt that which was certain and manifest, he says that he can not doubt the perception of the occurrent mental acts (e.g., perceptions and imaginations): "...and not even now do I deny that these ideas are met with in me" (HR I, 158). In these passages a relationship is clearly drawn between the "ideas" considered "in themselves," the occurrent mental acts, and the notion of modes. Rather than confuse ideas modes and acts here, I believe, the argument Sievert offers suggests the complex interrelationship amongst these different Cartesian concepts and it should be clear that some of the discussion of ideas directly relates to the argument relating modes and substances.

Descartes maintains that it is via perceived qualities that we can come to know (finite) substance (given the general truth that "no qualities or properties pertain to

⁸ Much more, of course, needs to be said in this regard. Such comments would lead away from the examination of Sievert's interpretation however.

nothing" (HR I, 223).⁹ While he is absolutely certain that there are occurrent acts--ideas which, because they have their representational claim removed, are never false--such certainty can yield certainty that there is a thinking substance only if his inability to conceive of occurrent mental acts without agents (better: thinking substances) can be given epistemic rather than merely psychological status. This latter claim, however, receives no support until the demon hypothesis is dismissed. The ideas he is unalterably certain of (those which survive all doubt) provide only part of the foundation for the inference to thinking substance--the occurrent acts (or ideas) give us modes and a form of self-knowledge, but our certainty here does not warrant us in asserting the existence of a thinking substance.¹⁰

In terms of their epistemic status, then, there is a clear difference between the two claims to self-knowledge. The occurrent claim is indubitable while the substantial claim is premissed (in part) upon the occurrent claim and is, furthermore, dubitable until the demon hypothesis has been disposed of. Thus, in the third Meditation where Descartes expresses the conflict between the sort of clear perceptions which caused him to assert that he had self-knowledge in the second Meditation and the all-pervasive demon hypothesis which forces him to question whether anything is certain (HR I, 158-159) he should be read as asserting that he cannot doubt the existence of occurrent mental acts, but that he can doubt the existence of a substantial self. The four step inference from occurrent mental acts to knowledge of the substantial self is subject to doubt because it requires the move from acts to agents wherein ideas are no longer considered only "in themselves" but rather as representations of (attributes of) something else.

In doubting the substantial conception of the self Descartes is not calling into question the observation of the occurrent acts. To do this would be to leave him

⁹Cf., also HR I, p. 233 and 240. The first passage here also provides additional support for the idea that the perceived qualities of our mind are modes.

¹⁰In section II below I will detail a criticism of such views offered by Humber who takes exception to talk of modes abstracted from substance. In section III I will take exception to this objection.

without a conceivable basis upon which he might build up a full body of knowledge of the sciences. No inference is involved in the certainty he has of the occurrent self--only observation is appropriate here. Inference, however, is at the core of the "certainty" which applies to the substantial conception of the self, and inference "... carries with it the risk of doubt" (S, 58). It is this doubt which he seeks to remove in the third Meditation with his proof of God.

This, then, is the core of Sievert's interpretation: two views of self-knowledge. One substantial, inferential, subject to doubt, and requiring the demise of the demon for the removal of this doubt; the other indubitable and perceptual in character. Doubts about the inferred substance are clearly compatible with the indubitability of the perceived occurrent acts. Thus Descartes is rescued from the apparent contradiction of both calling dubitable and indubitable his self-knowledge (better, the apparent contradiction is shown to be just that).

II.

Humber maintains that there are two fatal flaws and one outright contradiction in Sievert's interpretation. First he argues that Sievert's view of Descartes as doubting his self-knowledge of the substantial self requires that Descartes doubt that which is intuitively certain. The argument for this difficulty runs as follows. Humber sees Sievert as arguing (i) that the cogito argument of the second Meditation is an inference from occurrent mental acts to a substantial agent and (ii) that this inference may be called into question. Humber maintains, however, that the cogito has the character of an immediate inference that is logically necessary (H, 255). Such inferences, according to Descartes, carry all the certainty of intuitions. Moreover, Humber contends, the text does not support Sievert here because there are only two reasons which Descartes provides in the third Meditation for doubting the inference from modes to substances--neither of which apply to doubting intuitive certainties:

...Descartes gives the two reasons why he must doubt judgments affirming an idea-ideate correspondence. First because Descartes has ideas of extra-mental objects during sleep, he concludes that it is not necessary that there be material objects in order for there to be ideas of such objects in his mind. And second, even if Descartes were sure that some of

his ideas were caused by material objects, "it is not a necessary consequence that they [the material objects] should resemble these [ideas]" (H, 255).

According to Humber, the proof of the existence of the body in the sixth Meditation is an example of the type of doubt which Descartes applies to the idea-ideate correlation and this application of the inference from acts or ideas to agents or substances is one for which Descartes claims only probability, not certainty. But such doubts about the idea-ideate correlations in the case of bodies clearly do not apply in the case of the inference from mental acts to mental agents. Thus, Humber finds Sievert's account of Descartes' self-doubt inadequate because it would require that Descartes doubt the intuitively clear and because the only reasons Descartes provides for doubting the correlations between ideas and substances apply to probabilistic knowledge of the body and not to knowledge of the self.

According to Humber the second major flaw in Sievert's view arises in regard to Descartes' certainty with respect to his knowledge of the occurrent self. To assert what Sievert says about the certainty applicable to occurrent acts, Humber notes, we are required to believe that Descartes conceives of the

...occurrent mental acts as independently existing things, that is, as things which do not need the support of an underlying substantia cogitans. This must be so, for if mental acts could not be conceived to exist except as modes or properties of a thinking substance, the existence of mental acts and thinking substance would be indissolubly joined, and Descartes could not be both: (a) certain that he existed as observed mental acts, and (b) doubtful that he existed as a thinking substance (H, 257).

However this commitment to conceive of modes as existing independently of substances flatly contradicts Descartes' statement in the Principles that modes are always in a substance (H, 158, HR I, 241). To hold that he is certain about the modes while being uncertain about the substance is to damn the perception of the modes as unclear because "...Descartes adamantly insists that anyone who conceives of mental acts as independently existing things does not perceive them clearly and distinctly" (H, 257). Thus, Humber maintains, the certainty of the self-knowledge of the occurrent self is had at the expense of the clarity of the perception involved--if one wishes to treat of these modes independently of substances.

Finally, Humber contends that Sievert contradicts himself in maintaining that Descartes does, when considering the occurrent conception of the self, find it conceivable that modes may be dealt with independently of substance while also maintaining, as Sievert does, that it is clear that modes always exist within a substance. Since the modes or acts must be separated from the substance or agent of Sievert's account if Descartes' certainty in regard to the occurrent self is to work, while these modes and substances must be intimately intertwined if the inference to the substantial self is to go through, Sievert must surrender either Descartes' certainty or his doubt in regard to self-knowledge.

III.

Humber's first difficulty, which would commit Sievert to having Descartes doubt intuitive truths, is based upon the assertion that the cogito (and, presumably, the other arguments for the self) is a "simple inference" (H, 255) which is necessary and which proceeds from "other facts which are known with certainty" (H, 254). Sievert's account of the inference, however, has three premisses. The first, that occurrent acts are observed, is not doubted by Descartes. The second, which maintains that Descartes cannot conceive of these acts without conceiving of an agent, is also never doubted by Descartes. However, these two together do not yield the conclusion that there is such an agent--a substantial self. This conclusion requires also the certainty of the remaining premiss, that God be a nondeceiving God so that one's clear and distinct conceptions may be considered to represent truly. To know the third premiss, then, one would need to know the proof for the existence of God of the third Meditation. Thus, the inference to the substantial self is one which flows from occurrent acts, through God, to the substantial self. Such an inference is surely not "immediate," nor is it the case that, prior to the proof of God, it is one which proceeds from premisses which are certain.

One may question, at this point, whether Sievert is correct in supposing that all these premisses (the third in particular, obviously) are necessary for the establishment of the substantial self. Indeed, this is, perhaps, what Humber is about. But Sievert provides strong evidence for his view of the inference. This evidence consists of: the character of the proof of the self in the sixth Meditation (S, 54-55; HR I, 190); the reply to Gassendi (S, 57, 62-63; HR II, 207); and, what is most telling in my opinion,

the passage in the third Meditation where Descartes first recites what he has come to know, then "remembers" the demon, and then questions whether he can be certain of "anything" as long as this demon hypothesis is operative (S, 66-67; HR I, 158-159).¹¹ Here is Sievert's discussion of this passage:

What are the claims about which Descartes is "persuaded" but which nonetheless may be doubted prior to the proofs about God? The two he unmistakably and explicitly mentions are that he exists while he thinks that he is and that two and three make (exactly) five....Thus Descartes is saying that he is inclined to assert or believe that he exists while he thinks that he is, regardless of whether or not there is a demon. He claims, however, that such an assertion is justified, strictly speaking, only after he has eliminated the demon possibility (S, 66). My point about the...passage can be put differently. At the end of the passage, Descartes says that without knowledge that God is not a deceiver, he can never be certain of "anything." The extension of "anything" presumably includes the two claims mentioned earlier....(I do not think, however, the extension can be so broad as to include, literally, everything). The extension of "anything" includes, then, the claim that Descartes exists while he thinks that he is (S, 67).

Descartes, then, is here doubting whether he is certain that he exists and maintaining that judgment on this question must be withheld until the demon hypothesis is defused. This is to assert that self-knowledge of the substantial self awaits guarantees additional to those offered by the perception of occurrent mental acts. The observation of these acts is clearly, according to Sievert, not within the extension of "anything" in this passage. Further evidence for this is provided in a passage (HR I, 159-160) following the one in question here in the third Meditation wherein Descartes maintains that ideas or acts considered only "in themselves" and not in relation to

¹¹ Sievert offers further evidence especially from the Principles (S, 56-57; HR I, 231-232, 238-239) and from the Objections and Replies (HR I, 63-64, 98).

anything else are incapable of being false and that falsity enters the picture only when we consider ideas not "in themselves" but as representations of (or attributes of) something else (this passage will be discussed in greater detail below).

These passages, as well as the others noted above, strongly suggest an interpretation which has Descartes offer both sorts of knowledge claims about the self, has him maintain that certainty in regard to occurrent acts does not, by itself, provide certainty in regard to substantial agents, and has him provide a premiss which would move him from the one certainty to the other. The sixth Meditation proof and the reply to Gassendi are both, here, suggestive of the fact that this is just what is on Descartes' mind at this point in the third Meditation.

Humber has a second piece of evidence which leads him to suggest that Sievert is wrong here. It is that the doubts mentioned by Descartes as to the idea-ideate correspondence in the third Meditation are ones which apply to physical objects rather than to mental substances (H, 255-256). The passages cited by Humber may well have the force he attributes to them, but what of the passage where Descartes first says he is certain that he exists and then says that until God is proven to be nondeceiving he cannot be certain of anything? More to the point, what of the two points in the third Meditation where Descartes contrasts ideas considered "only in themselves" and ideas as representations of things (HR I, 159-160, 161-162)? Here there seems to be no restriction of attention to the physical. These passages suggest, rather, that while Descartes has knowledge of ideas qua ideas, he must question whether he has knowledge of ideas qua representations or attributes until he can find a guarantee of his clear and distinct ideas. The knowledge of ideas qua ideas is not what is wanted, in the long run, if skepticism is to be met and science is to be saved. Rather it is necessary that the role of ideas as representations and modes be established. Here some guarantee is required and Descartes would provide this. To say this is to say that Descartes did, in the third Meditation, provide exactly the sort of doubts which Humber fails to discover.

If what I have said is correct, Sievert is not at all committed to having Descartes doubt intuitive truths. The truth of the second premiss of the argument in question, that Descartes cannot conceive of acts without agents, is inadequate for the certainty of the existence of agents unless it is supplemented by some guarantee that such

conceptions may be taken to indicate truths about the world. Otherwise such conceptions could possibly be merely psychological compulsions or the effects brought on by some evil demon. The reference of such conceptions must be secured and this is the chore of the third Meditation. Until this security is provided, certainty is confined to the ideas considered only "in themselves," e.g., to occurrent mental acts.

The second major fault Humber finds in Sievert's interpretation is that it would commit Descartes to the existence of ideas, modes, or attributes as existing without agents or substances. To this I think there are two replies. First, Descartes is engaged in an epistemic search the final goal of which is justified knowledge of substances. His procedure is to know these substances through their attributes. Now, certainly, one may maintain that we can only know substance via attributes, and maintain that this inference must be established or guaranteed, without maintaining (metaphysically speaking) that the attributes have an existence separate from, or distinct from, that of substances. One could, of course, be committed to the existence of modes without substances if one did not go from the occurrent conception of the self to the substantial conception. But Descartes does not rest content with the knowledge provided by the observation of the occurrent mental acts. The knowledge of these acts is a necessary preliminary to the knowledge of the substantial self.

Descartes is quite willing to talk of modes and to make claims about them while making no claims about substances. Thus consider the following passage which has been alluded to frequently in the above:

Now as to what concerns ideas, if we consider them only in themselves and do not relate them to anything else beyond themselves, they cannot properly speaking be false; for whether I imagine a goat or a chimera, it is not the less true that I imagine the one than the other (HR I, 159).

Ideas qua ideas--considered only "in themselves"--are not false because no judgments are made as to the correlation of idea and ideate. As long as these ideas are not related to anything beyond themselves--as long as they are considered as modes only¹²--falsity will not enter into the

¹²Cf., HR I, p. 160, p. 223, and p. 158 again for support

picture. That is to say, Descartes is unable to doubt his observations of the occurrent mental acts. This certainty about the occurrent mental acts, however, does not extend to a certainty about the idea-ideate correlations. It is exactly this worry which gets the work of the third Meditation under way:

I am certain that I am a thing which thinks; but do I not then likewise know what is requisite to render me certain of a truth? Certainly in this first knowledge there is nothing that assures me of its truth, excepting the clear and distinct perception of that which I state, which would not indeed suffice to assure me that what I saw is true, if it could ever happen that a thing which I conceived so clearly and distinctly could be false ... (HR I, 158).

Descartes has no doubt about the clear and distinct perceptions--ideas, considered "in themselves," do not admit of falsity--and we are, thus, certain of the perception of the (occurrent) self. However, if there is any reason to doubt that what one clearly and distinctly conceives might be true, this doubt must be removed before clarity and distinctness in general may be taken as a mark of truth. Of course, there is such a reason for doubt, as Descartes quickly notes, and this he must consider if he is to be certain of anything. Thus we find, following the above citation, an extended discussion of the conflict between the certainty of the perceptions and the doubt brought on by the demon as to the representational character of our ideas. Descartes cannot help but think that ideas are in agents, nevertheless, he must justify this principle, or conviction, if it is to truly ground his knowledge of substance. The knowledge generated when one considers ideas "in themselves" is not, then, complete or adequate, but this knowledge is a necessary preliminary to the final and complete knowledge of substance. This discussion of ideas "in themselves" certainly does not, then, commit Descartes (or Sievert) to the separate existence of the modes.

In reply to Humber's objection here that Sievert would have Descartes treat modes as separate existents, it is important to note that there is a nonsequitur involved in

of this use of 'idea' and 'mode'.

arguing, as Humber does, that "...if mental acts could not be conceived to exist except as modes or properties of a thinking substance, the existence of mental acts and thinking substance would be indissolubly joined...." (H, 257; emphasis added). This nonsequitur is avoided only if there is some guarantee that our convictions are indicative of the character of reality. But it is just this which awaits the guarantee of a nondeceiving God. Thus, without the third premiss in Sievert's argument we are left with a major difficulty in the argumentative chain. If one opts for Humber's view that connection in conception indicates indissoluble joints in independent reality, one wonders why Descartes bothered to offer a cosmological proof of God at all. Clarity of conceptions, of itself, becomes a full guarantee of truth. Such a view seems fraught with difficulties.

Finally Humber alleges that Sievert contradicts himself in that: (i) he maintains that in the second premiss of his inference to the substantial self, Descartes cannot conceive of the occurrent acts without conceiving of a substantial agent; while (ii) his account of the certainty in the case of the occurrent conception of the self is premised upon the conception of modes as existing without substances. However, since the second statement is brought into question by the above considerations, the contradiction collapses. The certainty of the self-knowledge of the occurrent mental acts does not involve any assertion of the existence of these acts independent of agents. Rather, this certainty is premised upon the fact that ideas, considered only "in themselves," are not false. The perception of these acts cannot be doubted, but one can doubt that this perception, of itself, establishes idea-ideate correlations--until, that is, a guarantee for such a move is available.

IV.

There is, then, much to recommend Sievert's interpretation: it promises to unify the various statements about self-knowledge and self-doubt, clarify what is certain at each stage of the argument, and deal with the difficult passage near the beginning of the third Meditation where Descartes seems to doubt that which he has previously pronounced indubitable. I must admit, however, that I am convinced that Sievert indicates what Descartes should have said rather than what he did say. Or, to be more fair to both, that it is toward the distinction which Sievert proposes that Descartes is moving, but that he does

not have this goal clearly in mind.

There are four passages in the second and third Meditations which indicate that Descartes did not consistently distinguish between the occurrent and the substantial conceptions of the self.¹³ In each of these passages, I believe, Descartes advances the substantial conception of the self, although, in each case, he is entitled only to be certain of the occurrent conception. I do not believe he advances the former conception while he realizes he is only entitled to the latter, rather, I believe he does not clearly distinguish between the two conceptions. To the extent that he does not clearly distinguish these conceptions, he tends to believe that with his perception of the occurrent mental acts he has arrived at a justified conception of the agent or substantial self.

This confusion may well be behind any progress that he can make beyond the concept of an occurrent self given his chosen procedure. This is suggested by the following passage which is the first of the four passages I will offer:

For although the idea of substance is within me owing to the fact that I am substance, nevertheless I should not have the idea of an infinite substance --since I am finite--if it had not proceeded from some substance which was veritably infinite (HR I, 166).

This statement that he is a substance (the first such assertion I can discover in the Meditations) occurs immediately after his conclusion that God must necessarily exist. It functions both to support and to clarify the proof offered which proceeds from the character of Descartes' ideas to the causes of these ideas. Nowhere during this proof, nor before the above statement, is

¹³I will pass over here the difficulty, noted in section I above, in deciding whether "the" occurrent conception is the one of (1) or (1'). I feel the ambiguity while serious is as much Descartes' as Sievert's. While Sievert's interpretation may be flawed in that it does not deal in detail with this ambiguity, it nonetheless is important in that it stresses the existence and role of this (these) conceptions in the Meditations.

there an explicit inference from occurrent acts, through God, to this notion of a substantial self. Indeed, such an inference would be inappropriate since, at this point, it has not been established that God is a nondeceiver. If the substantial self is not justified by the four step inference, what does, at this point justify it? I think we must conclude that Descartes is operating as if he has proven that he is a substance prior to this point, but because in fact only the occurrent conception is available, he is confusing the occurrent and the substantial conceptions of the self.¹⁴

This confusion brings out an important point. The third Meditation proof of God's existence is a causal one going from the character of the ideas to their cause. The proof introduces first a causal principle in regard to the generation of ideas, and, secondly, a search, on the part of Descartes, for an idea which by its character clearly indicates that it cannot be caused by him. The "him" here, however, can only be the occurrent self--that is the only conception of the self that is justified at this point. But the attribution of causation (of ideas) to an occurrent mental act seems to make little sense. This fact forces me to conclude that Descartes, as he proceeds to prove God's existence, must be operating with the substantial conception of the self. This is the case even though earlier in the third Meditation he has distinguished between clear perceptions and clear conceptions and come very close to explicitly offering the distinction between the two

¹⁴The virtue of Sievert's reading is that it would clarify Descartes' assertions of self-knowledge and self-doubt. It would do this by attributing to Descartes a four step inference in the sixth Meditation--one which avoids the mistake of skipping from clear conceptions to assertions of ontological import. Thus in the second Meditation the first and second premisses are elaborated while in the third, fourth and fifth Meditations the third premiss is dealt with. But if this interpretation is to hold we can not expect Descartes to violate the noted order four times at such crucial points in his argument. One might conclude from these passages above that Descartes advanced only the substantial conception. However Sievert presents strong evidence, as we have seen, for the claim that Descartes does, indeed, offer an occurrent conception.

types of self (HR I, 158-159). The proof of God's existence, then, seems to rely upon a causal principle which requires the substantial conception of the self which, in turn, may only be justified once God's existence and non-deceptive character has been established. The circular argument is hidden by conflating the two distinct conceptions of the self.

A second passage from the third Meditation offers further evidence that Descartes is operating with the substantial conception of the self as a justified conception:

I am a thing that thinks, that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies, that knows a few things, that is ignorant of many /that loves, that hates/, that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives; for as I remarked before, although the things which I perceive and imagine are perhaps nothing at all apart from me and in themselves, I am nevertheless assured that these modes of thought that I call perceptions and imaginations, inasmuch only as they are modes of thought, certainly reside /and are met with/ in me (HR I, 157).

I read this passage as summarizing the accomplishment of the previous Meditation. He is asserting that these modes of thought (cogitandi modos) are certainly in him ("...in me effe fum certus")¹⁵ and, thus, locating the occurrent mental acts within a single agent. If the proof of God's existence to be offered later in the third Meditation is to work this is absolutely necessary. This proof is based upon noting that (i) Descartes has the idea of God who is, among other things, all-knowing, and (ii) Descartes has doubts. But the occurrent act consisting of the divine idea and the occurrent act consisting of the doubts must belong to the same individual. If this is not the case the proof will not be able to establish that God exists and has the desired characteristics. First, the proof would misfire in that it seems hard (within the Cartesian framework) to attribute causality to an occurrent mental idea. Second, the proof needs the fact that all the characteristics of God belong to one single idea--that all the perfections reside within one idea. Without this fact that

¹⁵C. Adam and P. Tannery(eds.), Oeuvres de Descartes, Vol. VII, Paris, 1971, pp. 34-35. Hereafter cited as "AT" followed by the page number.

several occurrent acts are joined together, the evil demon cannot be overcome. Moreover, Descartes considers it important that he establish that he is not God. These latter two points, as well as the proof itself which compares the idea of God with the fact that Descartes doubts, require the location of all these occurrent acts within one (mortal) agent.

An alternative reading of the passage in question would be one which maintained that here Descartes tentatively postulated the substantial self as the location of these occurrent acts and then, later in the Meditation, doubted his entitlement to this postulation until he had established God's existence and nondeceptive character. This reading, however, makes the proof difficult, if not circular, and runs up against the statement cited earlier in this section that Descartes is a substance. Moreover, this interpretation must deal with the fact that Descartes states that he is certain that these modes of thought "reside in me." To be certain of this is presumably to be certain of the substantial account, for to say this is to say much more than that there are occurrent mental acts. In this passage he is saying that several of the distinct occurrent acts are correctly characterized as belonging to one agent.

The third passage I wish to consider consists of Descartes' discussion of self-identity in the second Meditation. Here, as in the last passage discussed, he maintains that several occurrent acts are to be correctly characterized as belonging to one agent:

But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.

Certainly it is no small matter if all these things pertain to my nature. But why should they not so pertain? Am I not that being who now doubts nearly everything, who nevertheless understands certain things, who affirms that one only is true, who denies all the others, who desires to know more, is averse from being deceived, who imagines many things, sometimes indeed despite his will, and who perceives many likewise, as by the intervention of the bodily organs? Is there nothing in all this which is as true as it is certain that I exist, even though I should always sleep and though he who has given me being employed all his ingenuity in deceiving me? Is there likewise any one of these attributes which can be

distinguished from my thought, or which might be said to be separated from myself? For it is so evident of itself that it is I who doubts, who understands, and who desires, that there is no reason here to add anything to explain it (HR I, 153).

Here we have the apparent reference to substance-attribute metaphysics in the statement that these "attributes" belong to me. However, 'attribute' may be misleading here. In Latin the "attribute" statement reads as follows:

Quid est quod a me^a cogitatione distinguitur?
Quid est quod a me ipso separatum dici possit?
Nam quod ego sum qui dubitem, qui intelligam,
qui velim, tam manifestum est, ut nihil occurrat
per quod evidentius explicetur (AT VII, 29).

Nonetheless, the intent of the passage is quite clear. All of these occurrent acts, or attributes, are to be located in Descartes' character. It is clear, he says, that it is he who doubts, who understands, who desires. So clear that no reasons are required. Thus, in both this passage and in the previous one Descartes is claiming not only that it is evident that there are occurrent mental acts, but also that it is evident and certain that these acts are tied together. It seems, then, that he is arguing for an agent who has (does) these various acts.

Again, an alternative reading may suggest itself. One could read the passage, as I believe Sievert would suggest, as expressing Descartes' conviction that the acts require a single agent. This conviction, however, is later called into question and, thus, requires a divine guarantee. This reading provides the same qualification as the alternative offered in regard to the passage at the beginning of the third Meditation. The idea in each case is that Descartes is, indeed, distinguishing between the occurrent and the substantial conceptions of the self, and that he is both indicating how the substantial conception asserts more than the occurrent conception and how one may come to doubt what seems so evident (e.g., that there is an agent). Having done this, Descartes will proceed to show how he can have knowledge of the substantial agent by proving God's existence and goodness. This reading, however, runs up against the problem indicated in both of the previous citations. To read his discussion in this manner requires that the question of self-identity await the proof of the existence of a nondeceiving God. This precludes the very proof which Descartes offers since the proof relies upon this concept

of self-identity. Moreover, this reading must deal with the certainty he expresses as to his being a substance and as to the modes being in him. To maintain that he expresses only conviction here rather than that he advances claims of knowledge seems untenable.

The three passages cited, then, show that Descartes accepts, before he can offer the requisite four step inference, the substantial conception of the self. This acceptance is not tentative. Descartes says that he is certain and that no further evidence is necessary to establish that the various occurrent mental acts are his own. Nor is he expressing mere conviction or psychological certainty here. Descartes recognizes that the conviction that acts require an agent requires additional support if the metaphysical doubt embodied in the evil demon is to be met and true certainty to be attained.

How are such claims of certainty to be reconciled with the interpretation of Descartes defended by Sievert? I think that Sievert offers very strong evidence which shows that the distinction between occurrent and substantial self is central to the Meditations. It is clear that Descartes does offer the four step inference in the sixth Meditation and that it is behind much of what happens in the second and third Meditations. It is clear also, however, that Descartes argues for self-identity and that this involves treating himself as a substance. This self-identity, this substantial conception, is presupposed in the cosmological proof he offers for God's existence. If this is the case, no reconciliation seems possible, rather we must conclude that Descartes fails to adhere to Sievert's argumentative order.

It is in accepting this conception of self-identity that Descartes steps outside the argumentative order proposed by Sievert. I think that Descartes does this because he does not clearly conceive the distinction between occurrent and substantial selves. While he recognizes that his observations of occurrent acts of thinking cannot (either by themselves, or in conjunction with a "conviction") establish a substantial self, he takes it as evident that there is a connection among the various observed acts.¹⁶ While

¹⁶In saying that Descartes takes it as evident that there is a connection among these various states there is, perhaps, the suggestion that he might hold to a "bundle theory" of the self--Zeno Vendler, in his Res Cogitans (Cornell, Ithaca, N.Y., 1972, p. 185) suggests that such a

he would treat ideas only "in themselves" until he establishes God as a nondeceiver, he seems to feel that ideas "in themselves" show this connection to one another. Consider the following passage from the second Meditation:

What of nutrition or walking....But if it is so that I have no body it is also true that I can neither walk nor take nourishment. Another attribute is sensation. But one cannot feel without body, and besides I have thought I perceived many things during sleep....What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason....a thing which thinks (HR I, 151-152).

In this passage I find the ambiguity which is

view might be Descartes'. Holding such a conception would greatly enhance Descartes' overall argument. By observation he could be certain that there were occurrent acts of thinking (occurrent conception of the self). In addition, he could "observe" that these acts were associated together (bundle conception). Neither of these claims would be subject to the metaphysical doubt characterized by the demon hypothesis. Now, however, he would be justified in offering (ignoring, for the moment, any other significant objections) the proof of the existence of God as he could validly assert that the various ideas cohered together. Thus he could go on to prove God's goodness and, finally, the substantial conception of the self. Unfortunately, the connection amongst the various observed acts is not one of act to act but of each act, individually, to the "I." Thus he says "... it is so evident of itself that it is I who doubts, who understands, and who desires, that there is no reason here to add anything to explain it" (HR I, 153). As I noted above in my discussion of this passage on self-identity, Descartes is here claiming that each of these occurrent acts, or attributes, is to be located in him--and the sense of self I believe to be relevant here is the substantial one.

characteristic of Descartes' discussion of the self. There is a clear recognition of the occurrent conception of the self in his assertion that he might cease existing if he ceased thinking. But there is also an illicit certainty of a substantial conception expressed in the passage. The various acts, nutrition, walking, sensation, dreaming, and thinking, are recognized by him to be all his own. Thus he is, "to speak accurately," certain that he is a mind, soul, understanding, reason, a thing which thinks. While the statement of the substantial self is not explicit (the reference to "attributes," as in the third citation above, is not borne out in the Latin text) it is implicit. Following this discussion Descartes goes on to ask what else is characteristic of himself and concludes with the discussion of self-identity discussed above.

In all four of these passages, then, Descartes illicitly crosses the boundary line between the occurrent and the substantial conceptions of the self. As the last passage indicates, this is a very easy thing to do. To say "a thing which thinks" or to say "just when I think" when one is considering the occurrent conception is to leave oneself open to the seduction of an immediate move from "there is thinking" to "there is a thinker"--a movement which is made without argument or notice. The value of a clear conception of the distinction between these two views of the self is apparent and Descartes comes close to providing such. Moreover, it is just this distinction which Descartes should have offered. To the extent that Descartes does offer this distinction and where it is important for his arguments in regard to self-knowledge and self-doubt, Sievert's interpretation is extremely valuable. Insofar, however, as Descartes fails to keep this distinction clearly in mind, Sievert's interpretation may mislead us. Indeed, where Descartes fails to keep this distinction clearly in mind, he seems to fall prey to the very seduction he would avoid. Unlike Sievert, this is the Descartes I find in the Meditations.

In concluding I wish to reiterate four points. First, I have defended Sievert's claim that Descartes' doubts his knowledge of his self. Secondly, I do not agree with Humber that the inference to the self is an immediate inference which is not subject to doubt. As I have indicated, Sievert is correct in pointing out that Descartes both doubts and is certain of his self. Humber, of course, is correct if he maintains that Descartes never doubts the occurrent self. However here it would seem that it is not an inference that is in question but, rather, a "perception." Thus, I maintain, Descartes does recognize both the

occurrent and the substantial conceptions of the self, Thirdly, I feel that Sievert's interpretation is attractive but that Descartes does not hold to the argumentative order Sievert indicates.¹⁷ The four passages I cite are all ones where Descartes is appealing to the substantial notion of the self well before such a notion is justified. Thus, finally, I hold that Descartes is confused. If I am correct here, Descartes does, indeed, express both self-knowledge and self-doubt but fails to clearly distinguish these conceptions and, consequently, is led into error.¹⁸

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¹⁷Of course this is complicated when we note the ambiguity as to whether the occurrent conception is that of (1) or of (1'). This complication in no way detracts from the fact, I take it, that Descartes is sometimes operating with a substantial conception where he is only entitled to utilize (one or another of) the occurrent conceptions however.

¹⁸Donald Sievert, A.I. Melden, and several anonymous reviewers for the Archives provided valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper and an earlier version was read in 1978 at the University of Miami where several helpful comments were offered.